Calliope's Gift

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Calliope's Gift

by DBMars

Summary

Hannibal Lecter, 13, is rendered mute by his traumas -- losing his parents, Mischa's murder, his forced cannibalism, and being remanded into a state-run orphanage in his family castle. The story begins after he's been rescued by Robert and Murasaki, who are at a loss as to how to help him. Post-war Paris is filled with memories of Europe's violence, so Murasaki and Chiyoh bring Hannibal to a remote cottage in Louisiana in an attempt to help him recover.

While exploring the bayou, Hannibal meets a local boy named Will, age 11, who seems to know exactly what he needs, even if Hannibal cannot speak.

As the years pass, their bond grows, and becomes unbreakable.

Notes

This story is for @RTuomasVKDesign, who was lamenting on Twitter that there were so few stories on Ao3 that feature Will as a comfort to Hannibal, responding to his needs and bringing him back to life after his trauma.

Chapter 1

Paris, 1949

They are talking about me again, right across the room, as though I were deaf, not mute.

“I think a change of scene would be best,” Murasaki tries again, speaking softly to my uncle. I can just hear her over the scratching of my pencil against the sketchpad balanced on my knees.

“Paris is the most beautiful city in the world, even now,” my uncle argues. “He’ll have the best education available.” His arguments are thin, and he knows it. It’s that he doesn’t want *her* to leave. “You want to take him somewhere remote where he can withdraw further into himself?”

“My love,” she murmurs, placing a hand on his cheek. Robertas’ face is graceful and thin where my father’s was square, the cheekbones stark and sharp. I turn the page in my sketchbook and begin to draw my father, Andrius Lecter. If I do not draw him, and my mother, and Mischa, I will forget what they looked like. I have filled book after book of sketches. There are calluses on my hands. “He needs peace. The evidence of the war is all around us here. There’s nowhere we can go that hasn’t been touched. Except for a place where the only fighting occurred half a world away in Pearl Harbor.” She sighs as he embraces her for a kiss. “‘Meditation brings wisdom; lack of meditation leaves ignorance.’ He has to learn who he is, to be at peace with it. He cannot go to school or do anything else until that peace is achieved.”

Robertas considers. I glance up from my drawing to note the longing in his eyes as he gazes down at his wife. Again, his silence makes clear what he would never say – that I am a burden. A child he never wanted, and now the reason he will be without Murasaki for months at a time.

Of course I am a burden. I am unable to speak. I am plagued by nightmares that call my aunt from her bed to comfort me. Sometimes they’re so terrifying I lose control of my bladder. There is something wrong with me and it is marrow-deep and they both know it. They were happy before I came.

And I do not wish to go to America. It takes me farther from my quarry. Somewhere in Europe, the men who killed my sister are living free and easy lives. When I am big enough, I am going to find them.

I turn the page in my sketchbook and draw their faces, all five of them on the same page, looming over the cowering figure of a little girl, uplit as if from the fires of hell. If I do not draw their faces, I will forget. And if I forget, I will never find them and kill them.

“We’ll go somewhere warm,” Murasaki says. “And see if we can melt that Lithuanian winter from his mind.”

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Will welcomes Hannibal into his world.

Chapter 2

Louisiana, June 1949

Will could feel the strange boy's eyes boring into his back. He knew he should be afraid. Will had lived his whole life in Lafayette parish and he'd never seen the boy with the sharp cheekbones and haunted dark eyes. He sure as hell wasn't local. The fact that he'd been sneaking around the swamp watching Will for the last two days should have been cause for concern. Beau Graham didn't raise no fools. But Will knew, the way he knew all sorts of things he couldn't know, wasn't supposed to know, that the boy didn't mean him any harm. He reminded Will of a stray dog that'd been beat by humans and tossed aside like trash, but still wandered the town with a longing look in its eyes, desperate for a gentle touch but unable to be friendly ever again. Dogs like that either had to be trained to love once more, or put down.

Even if you tamed it again, sometimes dogs like that forgot you were their friend. Got scared and bit you anyway, even after years of companionship. It'd happened just last spring to Old Man Robischeau and he'd lost two fingers and couldn't fix boat engines no more.

Old Man Robischeau hadn't had it in him to put the dog down himself. Had to have the county sheriff do it. Even though that dog ate his fingers whole, he still loved it. Will's father hadn't understood that in the slightest. But Will didn't need the golden pendulum that sliced across his mind sometimes to understand the old man's decision.

The pendulum showed him things he shouldn't know, couldn't know, just like Granny G's pendulum she used to tell the future. She could dangle it over a pregnant woman's belly and know if it was a boy or a girl, if the baby would be healthy or not. Sometimes she used a small board that had the alphabet painted on it in a circle, and the pendulum, a thick, inverted teardrop dangling from a delicate gold chain, would spell out the answers to her questions. She could find water. Once, she found oil, a long time ago, and the man who had hired her to dowse his land had gotten rich.

The pendulum swung again, dowsing through the swamp all around them. Will could see the boy in his mind's eye as he crouched near a cypress tree, a sketchbook in hand. He only drew faces.

Will reeled in his line. Bait gone, no fish. He set the pole to the side and shifted around on his favorite log, looking directly at the stranger, whose dark eyes went wide. “You can come up here n’ sit, if you want,” Will invited, though a little crossly. “Better’n creepin’ around back there, I reckon.”

The boy stood slowly and stepped out of his hiding place, folding his sketchbook under his arm. He was older than Will’s 11 years, he thought, but not by much. He was pale as an invalid, eyes darkly glittering like the surface of the swamp where the water mirrored the trees and the sky. Black mirrors, Granny G said, could be used to speak to the spirits of the dead. But more often than not, demons answered the call. He had dark hair, not as dark as Will’s, and stick-straight, combed carefully to the side, not a strand out of place. He wore a dress shirt and short pants with stockings and uncomfortable-looking patent leather shoes that were absolutely wrong for the swampy terrain. The circles under his eyes were deeply shadowed, his body sickly and thin.

“Well, c’mon, if you’re comin’,” Will said, pulling another worm out of the front pocket of his overalls and baiting his hook. He cast, his bobber resting on the glassy surface of the bayou, the ripples easing out until the water was pure and still again, doubling the gnarled cypress trees and mirroring the heavens.

Will felt the fallen tree shift a bit as the boy sat next to him, the sketchbook in his lap. “Skulkin’ around like that’s liable to get you shot,” Will advised. “Folks ‘round here don’t take to tresspassin’.”

The boy nodded. He was clutching his sketchbook so hard that his knuckles were white, and he was trembling like it was cold out.

“You sick or somethin’?”

The boy didn’t respond. Will reeled in his hook a bit, but he was only fishing to have something to do with his hands while he studied the boy. “Here, hold this.” Will offered him the fishing pole for a moment. The boy looked at it like he’d never seen one before. Will gestured with it again and the boy slowly set down his book on his knees and took the pole. The line shook and danced with his trembling.

Will rummaged in another pocket and came up with a handkerchief. Unwrapping it, he pulled out a handful of freshly-picked mint leaves. “Eat these. They’ll fix you right up.” He traded the handkerchief with the leaves for the pole. The strange boy just stared at the foliage. Will sighed irritably and picked up a sprig of mint. Sticking it in his mouth, he chewed it and swallowed. “Like that. It’ll help your gut if you’re poorly. Eat it all, my granny’s garden has plenty more.”

The boy copied what Will had done, and quickly consumed all of the mint. Shaking out the remaining stems, he carefully folded Will’s handkerchief and returned it to him. Will stuck it back in his pocket, and lifted up a metal canteen from where it rested at the base of the fallen tree, trailing the strap it was attached to along with it. He handed it to the boy. “Wash it down, now.”

The boy drank and handed the canteen back. Will set it on the ground and reeled in again. He cursed – another worm lost. Damn turtles. “Sorry for cussin’,” he said quickly, trying to gauge the boy’s response. He looked like the kind of young'un that wouldn’t say a filthy word. Will crossed himself and glanced up at the sky to apologize to God as an afterthought. Granny G didn’t believe in church, but Will’s mother used to take him to mass. He believed out of habit. And because his mother had.

Will set his pole aside and turned to the boy, folding up his leg so he could face him on the wide log. “You feelin’ any better?”

The boy nodded yes. The shaking seemed to have calmed a bit.

“Did you just move here?”

The boy nodded yes.

“I live about a mile west,” Will said. “You follow this trail here n’ it’ll catch you up to a gravel road. Make a left and you come up on an old church. Make another left and that’s my Granny’s house. My daddy’s in Biloxi workin’ the shipyards.”

Will saw the pendulum in his mind’s eye, and caught the small expression of question in the movement of the boy’s pale brows. “My mama’s dead,” Will said, picking up a nearby stick and digging it into the soft earth next to the log where they sat. “She went to be a nurse in the war and she got shot by a sniper in North Africa in ‘42. My daddy was a Seabee in the Pacific but when he came home he wasn’t right in the head. ‘Cause of Mama. He coulda been an engineer. He built bridges and all that, he’s smart, coulda gone to college, but the damn drink got ‘im. You know how it is.”

The boy nodded slowly, eyes on the smooth surface of the black mirror as they conjured the dead. He opened the sketchbook, flipping past several portraits too quickly for Will to see. On a blank page, he wrote *Hannibal Lecter* and showed it to Will. Then pointed to himself.

“That’s your name?”

The boy nodded.

“You can’t talk, can you? It ain’t that you're quiet – you’re a mute. But you can hear me, can’t you?” The boy nodded. “Well, all right, then.” He paused, watching the boy close his book again. “Hannibal,” Will tried the exotic name on his tongue. “That’s where Mark Twain is from. You ever read *Tom Sawyer* and *Huck Finn*?”

Hannibal shook his head no.

“Oh, you really should. I’ll bring ‘em to you. Say, you got any brothers or sisters that might wanta play? The only kids ‘round here live in town and they call me ‘swamp rat’ and say my granny’s a witch.”

Will watched with mounting unease as tears filled Hannibal’s eyes. It was strange – he didn’t make a sound when he cried, just looked at Will, enormous crystal droplets flowing down his

cheeks and dripping off the edge of his chin. Didn't sniffle, didn't move. It was uncanny.

"What's wrong? Did I do somethin' wrong?"

Hannibal gave a slight shake of his head.

"Hold on." Will rummaged in his overalls' deep pockets and came up with a sprig of lavender. "Here." He picked up Hannibal's hand. Hannibal snatched it away as if Will's touch burned, then slowly reached back out and let Will put the purple flower in his palm. Will held Hannibal's hand against his knee and crushed up the lavender blossom into his palm. "Smell it," he advised. "Go like this." Will trapped both hands over his mouth and nose.

Hannibal copied Will's motion and took several deep breaths. Within a minute, the strange, silent tears had stopped. "That's it," Will encouraged. "C'mon, do a few more. There." He pulled out his handkerchief again and passed it over. "Lotta folks say a boy shouldn't cry, but I don't mind. I done a fair bit of it myself, if you want the God's honest truth. I won't tell nobody you bawled."

Hannibal gave him back the handkerchief and Will stuffed it unceremoniously back into his pocket. "See? Magic. My granny taught me all kinda things like that."

The boy opened his sketchbook again and pointed at his name, then nodded towards Will.

"Oh, ah… I'm Will. Will Graham. My mama was a Devereaux from Lafayette and my daddy grew up in Acadia parish." He waited for some kind of recognition or acknowledgement. But there was nothing of the sort. Hannibal's expression was blank and Will could feel his confusion. "You *really* ain't from around here," Will murmured.

The shadows were getting long over the bayou. Will pulled out a broken wrist watch from his front pocket and checked the time. "*C'est tout*, I gotta go home for supper." He picked up his pole and looked at Hannibal again. "Come on down here again if you wanna. I'll bring you a fish pole and those books. If you come in the mornin' it ain't so hot."

The boy nodded, clutching the sketchbook to his chest. Will pulled another sprig of lavender from his pocket and offered it to him. "For the road," he said, slung his canteen around his neck, and left.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

> Hannibal sneaks out to find Will after dark, and they have an impromptu back-porch sleepover.

This arrangement has forced Murasaki to live as a recluse with a mute boy and her young attendant, shut away in an elegant but isolated cottage at the edge of the swamp where I met Will. She cannot go into town, and neither can Chiyoh. This country just finished a war with Japan, and the rural people would certainly be hostile. Only the man we've rented the cottage from, the great-uncle of one of Robertas' Parisian colleagues, can be trusted. His name is Monsieur Fontenot and we rely on him for everything. Like all men and some women, he is enchanted with my aunt and will be completely in love with her soon, if he isn't already.

I hate him. He speaks to me with slow, affectionate condescension as if I were intellectually defective, simply because I cannot speak. I'd like to kill him. For practice, before I find and murder the five men who took Mischa from me. I think it would do me some good, but as we are completely dependent on him for food and other essentials, my rancor will have to wait.

I hear his car coming down the road as I walk back slowly towards the cottage, thinking about Will Graham. I am so lost in my reverie that the rusty Plymouth has to swerve to the side to avoid me. I jump back, heart plummeting before I feel as though I could vomit it out. The Plymouth slows down and Monsieur Fontenot yells out the open windows. "Sweet Jesus, boy, what's the matter with you? You fixin' to get runned over?"

I stare at him. He sighs, exasperated, withdrawing a brightly-colored handkerchief to mop his dripping brow. "You be careful, now, your auntie'd cry a river if somethin' happened to you. Now git on home."

He pulls away. I wait until his car has disappeared before I begin walking again. I think about killing him, not in a vague sense, but in a detailed, logical, detached way. It would be satisfying to trick him into going someplace isolated. I could forge a letter from Murasaki and say she can't stop thinking of him, and to meet her somewhere desolate. He would come with a bouquet of flowers that would fall to the ground when I cut open his throat just enough so that he couldn't scream. I would come out from behind and show him who had just outsmarted him. The boy he treated like a broken thing, a supposed "cretin" in his words.

But not now.

Still, my mind replays the fantasy. At the end, when he's bled out, I see myself cutting into his abdomen and removing his liver. Not as a trophy, or to cause him more pain. But because I want it.

To keep?

No.

I imagine bringing the still-hot organ to my lips and opening my mouth.

Chiyoh serves supper and eats with us at the low table where we kneel, Murasaki and I facing one another.

“Did you have a pleasant walk?” she asks.

I nod.

“I’ve heard the swamps can be dangerous,” she says. “Are you being careful?”

I nod again.

When we’ve finished, I practice the piano, and then retire to my stifling bedroom upstairs where I lay on top of the sheets, staring up at the peaked roof. I don’t want to sleep. Maybe I’ll have a nightmare and maybe I won’t, but it’s not worth the risk.

I get up and switch on my bedside lamp, then climb down on the floor. Beneath the bed is a box that once held typewriting paper labeled SHEET MUSIC. I slide it out and open it. Inside rests two cans of beans, a can of peas, and two cans of tuna along with an opener. I slide a small jar of grape jelly out of my pants pocket and add it to the stash. I stole it from the pantry when Chiyoh was garnishing the noodles with sesame seeds. It’s still not enough food stashed away to make me feel safe. I’ll have to get more tomorrow.

I reach into the box and withdraw a pearl-handled folding knife. My father’s. I’ve honed the blade razor sharp. Every night I put it under my pillow. I know the house is locked, that no one knows we are here. I still keep it there, and reach my hand in the cool crevice to stroke it as needed.

I try to read, but my mind keeps thinking of the boy in the swamp. Will Graham. I set the book aside and rest my hands on my stomach. I dare to close my eyes and imagine him, to dissect every moment of our time together. The mint and the lavender. The way he spoke. His blue eyes, the color of the sea at Nice on the pebble beach.

Before I quite realize what I’ve done, I am downstairs in the kitchen, opening a drawer and finding an electric torch. I put on my shoes and slip outside noiselessly, retracing my path to where I’d met Will, and then following the directions he gave to find his dwelling. The old church he mentioned is not simply old, but abandoned, a simple white thing made of snarls of peeling wood. When I shine my flashlight on it, bats flutter from the steeple.

The house I find is a small red cottage with a brick chimney and white trim and shutters. The back of the house has a screened-in porch running across its length. There are no lights on, but several cats prowl the undergrowth, their eyes catching my light and glowing preternaturally through the swampland shadows.

The flimsy screen door leading to the porch is latched with a little piece of metal. Sliding a stick in pops it right open. I creep in slowly, latching it behind myself.

Will is here. He's asleep on a pallet on the floor of the porch next to a wicker rocking chair and loveseat, each occupied by a cat curled up for the night. He's laying on top of the sheets in his underwear, mouth open, curly hair tousled like a bitter halo. One of the cats is less than pleased with my arrival and jumps down from the rocking chair, making it creak to and fro. This wakes him. Will finds me kneeling at his side.

For a part of a second, he fears me, sucks in a breath. But then the instinct fades. He recognizes me. Those eyes seem to dig into mine and he *reads* me. He doesn't need me to speak; he *knows* . He sees.

"Hannibal?" he asks softly, rubbing his face and running a hand through his wild hair. "Couldn't sleep, huh?"

I nod.

"Hey, aren't you gonna catch it from your parents if they wake up and you're gone?"

I shake my head no. My parents are dead, and if Murasaki happens to notice, she won't come looking for me, nor will she make any attempt at discipline.

The cat that had fled at first has returned. It sniffs my leg where I've knelt next to Will, then rubs up against me, trailing tabby hairs. I reach out a dreamy, absent hand and pet her. "That's Evinrude," Will says. "On account of her motor, you hear dat?"

I can hear it. The cat's purr is rusty and unnaturally loud. She rubs her face against my hand over and over and I scratch her under the chin. She's very soft. Someone must brush her long hair regularly; it is silky and unmatted.

"Granny keeps cats," Will sighs, settling down on his side with his head propped up on his hand. "That's why I can't have a dog. You have a dog?"

I shake my head.

"I want a dog," Will murmurs, even as he accepts the loving attention of Evinrude. "I can train it not to chase cats." He pauses, looking up at me. Without confirming a thing, he slips inside and comes back with a worn quilt and another pillow. He folds the quilt into a makeshift mattress next to his own and places the pillow on it. We lay facing one another. The cat settles between us, despite the heat, turning on her side and kneading my midsection with her paws.

"You came all this way in the dark?" Will murmurs, his eyes already heavy with sleep again.

I nod.

"You got, ah… *moxie* , that's for sure," he says, blinking slowly. "Holy mackerel… ain't even a moon tonight…"

And with that, he's asleep again, dark lashes fanned against his cheeks. The cat kneads my stomach endlessly. I listen to him breathe. And then, impossibly, my eyes are heavy. I let them close, still tracking to the cat's purr. It breaks up like morse code as the cat falls asleep, wakes, sleeps again, wakes. At last, the paws go still and all I can hear is the soft movement of air between Will's lips, just above the thousand voices of every insect God ever made.

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So cold. My hands have moved beyond pain, my soul wrung out like a wet cloth, my mind as numb as the rest of me. I would lie down and die, but I have my sister to think of.

I can hear them outside, pacing back and forth in front of the barn door. The steps approach and then fall away. I cling to my sister, my arms weak, hushing her even as she makes no sound.

Our captors are arguing about which one of us they will kill to eat.

I turn to Mischa to console her, to promise it won't happen, that no one could be so cruel.

But Mischa is no longer in my arms. Behind her in the cattle stall is a luxurious dinner table, decorated with flowers and fruit, shining with candles and fine silver. It is only after staring at it for several moments that I realize my sister's body is there, served up on plates with garnish. Her head is missing the cheeks and her eyes are white like those of a boiled fish.

It smells delicious.

"Wake up. Hey, wake up – you're havin' a bad dream."

A hand on my chest, over my heart. Can he feel it cowering inside of me, a frightened rabbit? I shiver, feeling the brutal cold of that Lithuanian winter as if it is radiating from my marrow. I hear my breath catching, gasping.

"You okay?" Will props himself up on his elbow, his palm still over my sternum. His eyes are lidded and sleepy but searching my expression intently. His hand is so warm.

It is deep night now. I can feel the coming dawn in my bones, though there is no discernible light from it. I realize how hard I'm breathing and I try to stop.

"Nightmare?" he asks me.

I nod.

"It's okay," Will promises me. "I have them sometimes. You want some water or some sweet tea or somethin'?"

I shake my head no. I don't want him to leave, even if it's only for a few moments. I put my hand over his on my chest. Even as the dream fades I feel my throat constricting, the protective numbness cracking to pieces.

“You hear dat?” Will settles back onto his pillow. “Sometimes I try to, uhm… figure out each, ah, each sound I can hear out there.” He nodded toward the screens and the forest and bayou beyond. “Crickets. Frogs. Cicadas.” He pauses, and we listen. I try to pick out the individual sounds as opposed to hearing them all as a braided rope, the strands as one. “Those are southern grass cicadas,” he tells me, voice barely audible above the singing insects. “They have the nicest song, I think anyhow. But my favorite one to catch and look at has to be the morning cicada. You gotta see the proboscis on one of those things. The hieroglyphic cicada has the best name, I reckon. But the southern grass cicada… they, uhm, well, you can hear it. Their binomial name is *cicadettana calliope.* Calliope, y’know, like the, ah, the first of the nine muses. And she was the one in charge of poems and such, and she had a voice that was in harmony with itself. It was so beautiful it’d drive you crazy.”

Just like your voice, I wish I could say to him. I try to speak to him through my eyes.

He clears his throat, taking his hand back, and folding his arm behind his head. His cheeks are pink from the heat of the sweltering night, but now he isn’t looking at me and I don’t know what it means or what to do. “It makes sense,” he says after a heavy pause. “Because all the cicadas are in harmony with each other. *C'est bon* .”

My chest rises and falls normally and my skin is also flushed with warmth. The winter seems far away now. I don’t smell meat. I can smell the boy next to me, the gentle musk of his sweat, the clean linen of the sheet he has stretched over his mattress. The humid odor of the swamp – earthy and peaty, dripping with life.

He’s naming crickets now. I feel my eyes droop shut and I sleep without dreaming. It’s as if I’ve blinked and the sun is up. The cat has returned and is rubbing against Will’s upturned heels as he sleeps on his stomach. Even though I’ve woken up in a strange place, I feel no brush of anxiety.

I take a long, uninterrupted look at his sleeping face, and slip out the screen door and into the tender morning.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Will's letter to his father in Biloxi.

July, 1949

July 5th

Dear Dad,

I hope things are going good in Biloxi. Granny says I should write you once a month at least so you don't forget about us out here. School will be here before you know it and she says I need new shoes. I told her I could just cut the toes out but she said that wouldn't do. So if you can spare anything extra this month.

Well, you know that my letters are usually short. But I have a lot to say today. A boy moved in down the bayou into the old Fontenot cottage. He's 13 and his name is Hannibal, like the town Mark Twain is from. He can draw like you wouldn't believe. He can sketch something from memory he's only seen once and it looks exactly right. I'm sending you a picture he did of a hieroglyphic cicada. We go fishing, down to the swimming hole, we built a fort with a real door that opens and closes. We went to the junkyard and found enough old bikes to build him one, so now we can both ride to town to go to the library.

He's a mute, so he can't talk, but don't let that make you think he isn't smart. If he went to school here he'd be smarter than the teachers, hands down. He can't talk, but he can write. He writes me notes. Sometimes we write back and forth, which Granny says is good practice for me. Hannibal has nice penmanship and you can see how mine is chicken scratch.

At first Granny didn't like him so much. She said he was born under a bad sign, you know those feelings she gets. He gets awful nightmares but when he sleeps on the porch with me he doesn't have them anymore. Well, Granny thought that was a trifle strange, so she went on down to the old Fontenot place and talked to his auntie. Turns out she's Japanese, and I know what you'll say. First off, Hannibal isn't, she's married into his family, so don't pick up the phone and yell at me this very second. Also she's from Paris really. Her family left Japan a long time ago because they didn't want to be ruled by people like Hirohito. She was royalty, and Hannibal's uncle is a real-life count. He lives in Paris still. How people like them ended up in this neck of the woods I can't tell you.

Anyhow, Granny met Murasaki and I guess they worked things out. She told me that Hannibal had something bad happen to him because of the war over there. His parents are gone, just like Mama, and that's why he can't talk.

You won't believe what good sleep does to help a person. Daddy, maybe you should try it. Then you wouldn't have to drink as much and you could send the money for the shoes. Granny wanted me to mention shoes again. Anyway, what I meant is that when he sleeps over, he sleeps so good he looks like a whole different person then when he first came. I swear he's grown an inch. How tall are you? How tall do you think I'll be?

My hand is liable to fall off after all this. I'll just dictate to Hannibal next time so you can see how nice his writing is. Enjoy the picture. And Granny says again, please send some money.

Sincerely, your son,

Will

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

The legendary watermelon heist.

August, 1949

"You ready?" Will's eyes crackle with the intensity of Tesla coils, all excitement and mischief. He passes these feelings to me like he would a current of electricity when he puts a hand on my shoulder. It cuts through the numbness and brings me back to life. Or to life at all, like he is Victor Frankenstein. I only hope that when I am fully animated he will not reject his creation.

We are dressed for burglary. Will wears an ancient pair of short pants that are much too small for him – even now he has to tie them up with a piece of twine. Otherwise, he is bare and ready for a speedy exit. I have removed my tie, rolled up my sleeves, and abandoned my shoes back at the lean-to we built in the woods, the "fort," as Will calls it.

"All right." Will nods. He takes a breath and creeps up to a barbed wire fence, keeping the cover of the undergrowth. Beyond is a large garden, and our quarry – an enormous emerald watermelon swollen in the sun. In a flurry of action Will whips up an old piece of carpeting and lays it over the top wire of the fence, pushing the wires down with it. "Go!" he hisses over his shoulder.

I leap over the fence, and Will vaults it as well, handing me the carpet fragment and darting through the rows toward the watermelon. I race after him, my bare feet digging into the warm tilled earth. A month ago I couldn't have kept up with him. Now my body is strong, browned in the sun, my hands calloused not just from sketching but our endless play in the wilds. I can't hold my breath as long as Will can when we go to the inlet of a lake Will calls the swimmin' hole, but I'm making progress. My calves are sharply defined from the miles of bicycling back and forth to the small town called Bayou Bend to visit the library.

I could have waited by the fence, but just in case something happens, I want to be at his side. And sure enough, just as he picks up the watermelon, Miss Fontenot, Monsieur Fontenot's unmarried daughter (Will designates her a 'grouchy spinster') steps out on the back porch with a cigarette in her mouth and rollers in her hair.

Will plucks the vines away and gathers up the watermelon in his arms, their skin somehow paler than mine has become, though as the summer wears on he has more and more freckles. We race back across the garden. I time it perfectly, planting the carpet over the fence and

pushing down on the wires as Will jumps clean over it, even holding the bulging fruit. And I'm right behind him. "Hey!" comes the shout, but it's too late. Will and I are in the wind. We are the wind, racing through the woods back toward the cottage where Chiyoh is engaged in her lessons with Murasaki. This gives us free reign of the kitchen.

We planned our crime for Sunday morning, when the Fontenots were supposed to be in church along with everyone else. By the same token, Granny G will be busy with her clients, who come to her for divination and folk magic during church hours for the same reason. Will says she takes the phone off the hook when working with spiritual forces.

"D'you think she made us?" Will asks as we, at last, slow to a walk. The way he's carrying the watermelon in front of him gives him the silhouette of a woman heavy with child. I want to reach out and caress the fruit over his womb.

I shake my head no. The woman probably saw enough to know two white boys stole her watermelon, but not enough to ascertain our identities and call Granny G or come by the cottage. Plausible deniability.

We creep into the cottage and then open up the trap door to a small cellar of stone and dirt that holds an old well. With utmost care we place the watermelon in the splintered bucket and tie it securely. Together, we lower it down into the water below.

And now we wait, two fugitives hiding beneath the house. We enjoy the naughty thrill of hearing Murasaki glide across the floorboards above, making tea with Chiyoh, speaking gorgeous stains of Japanese that I can almost follow now. Murasaki continues my learning of the language, even though at the moment I cannot speak it.

Will is grinning. He puts his hands over his mouth, trying not to make a sound. It's wildly tempting for him, I imagine, a strange reflex like wanting to laugh during a funeral.

By the time a proper memorial service was given for my parents and my sister, an empty stone placed in Pere La Chaise, I'd gone numb. I couldn't make my face do anything, even if it was inappropriate.

Now it can move – my mouth, that is. Even now it smiles as Will rocks in place, trying not to laugh.

At last, Murasaki and Chiyoh return to the verandah at the back of the house. Will exhales out a breath he'd been holding and lets himself chuckle softly. Then, "Say, how old is Chiyoh anyhow?"

I point to him.

"11, like me, huh?" He pries up a rock from the dirt floor and looks beneath it for insects. Then, "Do you think she's pretty?"

My voice rages inside of me, a bird in a cage beating itself against the bars. I cough behind my hand and swallow what saliva I can gather to wet my throat. I shrug. Once, Will dared to ask Murasaki if Chiyoh could come to town and go to the library with us. Murasaki patiently

explained to him that it wasn't safe because of sentiments that remained after the war. And Chiyoh was not to play with us in the woods, because fine ladies do not run barefoot through swamps. Her responses were an intense relief to me. I enjoy Chiyoh's company well enough, and yes, Will's right, she is pretty. More importantly, brilliant, and already advanced in jujitsu. Back in Paris, she did what she could to try and help me regain some semblance of normal life. She is the one who put a pencil in my limp hand and a sketchbook in my lap. Without her, I would have forgotten the faces of my sister's killers, and those of my family.

But Will is *mine* . I can't account for my selfishness. I know it's immature and rude. And yet, I want him all for myself. I need him to be mine.

"How long's it been?" he asks.

I show him my wristwatch.

"That oughta do it." We haul up the watermelon and I dry it on my shirt, just enough so that it isn't slippery. Will takes it again and we creep out of the cellar before racing full tilt to the fort. Slipping inside, we sit on the salvaged boards we used to make the floor.

"All right," Will grins. "Split it open."

I draw my knife and make the incision. I've cut halfway when Will stops me, lifting the split melon to his mouth and putting his lips over the bottom of the crack, slurping the juice loudly before setting it back down and letting me continue. Since I split the melon, decorum suggests I let him choose which side. He chooses the slightly smaller one. He always does, and it makes me love him. I wipe the blade of my knife on my shorts and slip it back in my pocket.

And then we feast.

The watermelon is perfect. It is ripe without having lost its crisp texture, chilled and deliciously cold by the deep water of the old well. Will splits his again by hitting it against the boards and buries his face in the pink flesh, laughing at his despicable manners. " *Laissez les bons temps rouler,* " he says, lifting a rind and tapping it against mine like we were toasting with champagne. "I knew – I knew it was just perfect – if it hadn't been picked today it would've turned – mmm!"

"It's good," I say after spitting a seed.

Will's hands lower slowly, drawing the rind away from his face. Pink juice drips from his chin. His eyes are wide and bright.

I spoke. Now I don't know what to do.

"Say something else," he insists, brimming with excitement.

"Something else." I had forgotten how my voice sounds. In fact, it seems to have changed. Deepened. Not a man's voice, not yet, but it is not the same. It has a certain harmony with the rest of me, as if gifted by Calliope herself.

Will cracks a grin, wiping his chin with the back of his hand. “All right, that’s good. That’s real good.”

Silence again as we devour the rest of the watermelon, eating down to the rinds, scraping them with our teeth until there’s nothing left.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Will has a terrible first day of 7th grade.

September 1949

Will has been gone all day and time has never passed more slowly. I attempt to distract myself by writing out equations for time travel and revisiting H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine.* When he finally returns home I'm waiting for him at the fort, sketching a prototype. He's glowering, stomping through the undergrowth with his hands stuffed in his pockets. When he sees me, he breaks into a run. We duck inside the fort and sit with our legs crossed, knees touching.

"Worst day of my life," Will growls, picking up a stick and jabbing it into the dirt at the entrance to the lean-to. He has the most expressive *bahbin* I've ever seen, which is a Louisiana word for a pouting face and something his grandmother does not appreciate. "Now I git why people wanna quit school. We got a new English teacher this year, Miss Caroline, and she's from *Baton Rouge* ." He says this like it is a curse. "Comin' up in here like she knows everything."

Will tells me about his miserable experience at the public school in Bayou Bend where he's begun what's known as junior high. Apparently they read Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Cask of Amontillado" and, "She got the two main damn characters mixed up, Han! She's sayin' Fortunado walled up Montresor at the end, and-and I *tried* to tell her and she told me I was bein' disrespectful and I said it wasn't disrespectful to be right and it all sorta… uhm, it went south after that. She said she was gonna call my parents and then Sam Miles had the nerve to spout out that my daddy's a drunk who dumped me with my granny 'cuz he loved the bottle more, and, uhm, a-and that my mama was *dead* so who was she 'gon call exactly? So then I started cussin' out Sam Miles, and I know he's only sore at me 'cuz Granny put a curse on his papa for steppin' out on his mama – which his own mama asked for, by the way, and three months later the man was completely bald, no-no eyelashes o-or *nothin'* !"

Will pauses to breathe and I can see tears in his eyes. I reach out and I put a hand on his where it rests on his knee, just for a moment. He smiles, but it's thin and brittle. "So I'm gonna catch it tonight," Will says with a sigh, his breathing returning to normal.

"Will," I say. It's the easiest word for me to say. It always comes out gently, and I can use inflection to let him know what I mean. I say his name now with tenderness.

He sniffs, digging the stick in the dirt again. “You’re so lucky you ain’t on any register somewhere that says you hafta go to school. It was fun in the beginning but now it’s just…” He sighs, shrugging. “It was like this last year, too, in math class – the teacher kept putting up the wrong answers. I got sent to the principal.”

I want to find a way to tell him that I missed him today. That the seconds crawled by. He beats me to it. “I just kept lookin’ at the window and wishin’ I was out here with you instead.” He rubs his hair. “Say, you reckon we should go fishin'?”

I nod.

He clambers out of the fort and offers a hand to help me up. “Let’s go to your place and get your pole and tacklebox – I don’t want Granny to catch me at home just yet.”

But his grandmother is sitting on the front veranda with Murasaki having tea when we arrive. I hear Will murmur a curse under his breath. His grandmother is a gnarled creature, skin wrinkled and browned in the sun, her hair gathered into a knot that shows its color variation – silver on the sides and stormcloud gray on the top. If Will resents her being called a witch, he might suggest she attempt to not look so much like one. Today she is wearing a red and white striped dress with large buttons, all-weather boots, and her wrists and neck glimmer with colored glass beads. Her pendulum is threaded through her fingers, and she strokes the chain as she talks. In contrast, Murasaki in a dark green Balenciaga she ordered from New York. Even in the shade of the veranda, she wears a wide-brimmed black hat to protect her skin from the light. They are speaking conspiratorial French. I’ve known them to talk on the phone from time to time, mostly about our whereabouts, but now they seem far more intimate. Chiyoh sits at my aunt’s feet, practicing calligraphy, respectfully silent but still included in the conversation. Seeing them like this is otherworldly, as if Will and I have stumbled into a moment of feminine mystery, like the poor fool who caught sight of a naked Artemis bathing; she transformed him into a hart, and he was hunted down and torn apart. They are maiden, mother, crone, and we have no business here, even though the look Will gives me confirms what I suspect – they’ve been talking about us. Deciding our fates.

“Just the two we’ve been waiting for,” Murasaki says.

“Lemme guess, you got a call from the school,” Will says darkly, kicking a pebble with the side of his foot.

“Young man, you greet your elders before you dive right in to sassin’ me!” Granny G commands in voice that booms far beyond what one would think her frame could create.

Will falters and tries again. “ *Bonsoir* , Lady Murasaki.” She nods benevolently at him. “Miss Chiyoh.” This earns him only a raised eyebrow. He turns back to his grandmother, hackles raised.

“Now, tell me your side of things," she requests.

Will explains, hands in his pockets, kicking the rock. My voice coils up in me and I want to speak on his behalf. It turns out that I’m not needed. While Granny G does reprimand Will for being disrespectful to his teacher, she adds, “Y’know, *cher* , I gotta phone call like dat

every year you been in school. Sometimes mor'n one. But I never hollered atchoo or gave you any grief 'cuz I know you're smarter and brighter than every child and teacher in this parish. And until Hannibal came, you were alone 'cuz you're so *unique* . So, I'm pullin' you outta that school. And Lady Murasaki is gon' be your tutor, and Hannibal's too. But…" The woman rises to her tiny height; up on the raised veranda she is as imposing as Boadicea. "If I hear *one word* about you being smartass, disrespectful, cussin', or any such, I will toss you right back into that public school, you hear me?"

"Yes ma'am!" Will says, nodding vigorously, his eyes shining. My heart blossoms. Will, with me all day, at home with Chiyoh and I. I'm smiling, showing teeth. Will grins at me, then tries to drop the expression and folds his hands behind his back. He bows to my aunt and thanks her.

" *C'est bon* !" declares Granny G, and it's decided, those two words ringing like a judge's gavel. Since Will enrolled on the first day of school, the parish will count him in attendance, so there is no worry for truancy. Besides, Will tells me later, the principal and the teachers will be glad to see him go.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

> Hannibal and Will would both like to righteously kill the men who destroyed their families. Y'know, just tween things.

December 1949

“When Santa Claus gits to the bayou, his sleigh transforms into a pirogue and his, uhm, his reindeer become alligators,” Will said with a snarky smile as they cut up onions, garlic, celery, and bell peppers at Granny G’s kitchen table. “And they ain’t Dasher and Dancer no more – their names are Tiboy, Suzette, Renée, Ninette, Pierre, Alcée, Celeste, and Gaston.”

“Better,” Hannibal said, and Will’s ironic smile spread wide and genuine. His friend was saying words left and right these days, though usually only to Will, and only when they were alone.

“Yeah, sure,” Will chuckled. “Oh, hey, now, don’t cut the onion like dat or we’ll both be cryin’ like babies. You never wanna cut the root. Look here.” Will took the onion from Hannibal’s hand and showed him. “Like that, all right?”

Hannibal nodded, executing the new maneuver perfectly. Christmas music was on the radio and a chicken carcass was simmering on the stove to make the broth for the gumbo. The kitchen was warm and cheerful and Will chattered on happily about all the things Murasaki had been teaching them – things he’d *never* learned about in public school, like Latin and Parisian French and Japanese, theoretical mathematics, nuclear physics, and how to fight and subdue an attacker. And religions. Chiyoh and Lady Murasaki were Buddhists that also practiced Shinto, and Hannibal and Will learned all sorts of things about Christianity he was sure the parish priests didn’t want the common person to know.

Like, for example, lighting bonfires, a cajun tradition to help Pere Noel find the children in the bayou, was also something the heathens of Europe did long before Christianity to celebrate the Winter Solstice and drive back the dark, dancing around them to please their gods. Christ’s birthday was assigned to this time of year to make conversion easier. Will felt like he was privy to all kinds of secrets about the world he’d never known before. Instead of dragging himself out of bed every morning and limping off to school, dreading what indignities the day would bring, Will sometimes couldn’t sleep at night because he was so excited to pick up a lesson they hadn’t had time to finish.

And he got to be with Hannibal.

He knew, the way he knew all sorts of things he couldn't and shouldn't know, that Granny G was concerned about the amount of time the boys spent together. They slept in the same room, bouncing between either house. They spent all day together, did chores together, spent long hours in the woods or playing chess. Some of Will's favorite rainy afternoons were spent stretched out on couches or on the floor with pillows, each of them reading a book, pausing periodically to sip tea or grab a handful of Granny G's stovetop popcorn and share a bit of what they were reading with one another. Hannibal actually read aloud better than he spoke – it was easier for him to recite someone else's words, and Will encouraged it, if only to see Lady Murasaki glide by the door and offer him a thankful smile.

But even if Granny G was put off by her grandson's sudden affinity with the strange little family living in the Fontenot cottage, she allowed it. If Will's pendulum was right (and it always was) not only was she ecstatic to see Will challenged in his studies and enjoying them, she was deeply grateful for the financial assistance Murasaki seemed happy to provide. Will had shoes, new clothes that fit. Granny G had to tell people in town a distant relative had died and left her some money, as everyone in Bayou Bend knew the Grahams didn't have a pot to piss in. For once, Christmas was going to be a real holiday, even if Will knew the rituals were stolen and the Bible didn't exactly say all the things he'd been taught over the years.

"I think there's a reason we have holidays that, ah… happen to be on solstice or equinox times of year – it's just… part of being human in this hemisphere. Wrap it up and put a different color bow on it and now Yule is Christmas and Ostara is Easter, but it's all the same, ain't it?" Will gathered up the blunt ends of the celery and dumped them in the pot with the chicken frame.

Hannibal picked up his sketchbook and wrote for a bit as Will picked up the papery bits of onion skin and tossed them in the burn pile. He handed Will the book and Will paused to read.

Think of society like a pipe full of steam. The pressure of life builds and builds. Hard work and hard living under the thumb of oppressors. Holidays allow a release of pressure, which keeps the unwashed masses in line.

Will laughed so hard it was almost a cackle, handing back the book. "Damn, you sure know how to ruin a good time." But Hannibal was smiling too. "Well then, let's let off some steam."

Murasaki hosted the gathering, taking her role very seriously as tradition demanded, allowing Chiyoh to participate and watch her as a model of how to welcome guests into the home. There was gumbo and a few presents – oranges, candy. Hannibal played the piano and Chiyoh accompanied him on the flute. Will was encouraged to demonstrate the little bit of music he'd learned so far, and played a couple of scales.

Will hugged his Granny and helped her carry home the gumbo pot and gifts. Just as he was headed out to return to the cottage, Granny G caught his arm in her surprisingly iron grip. "Will," she said. "Are you happy?"

It seemed like an odd question, but easy enough to answer. "Yes ma'am, I am."

She nodded. “Your friend’s been through a lot of pain and sufferin’. I don’t know if he’s told you or not, but it’s more than a boy his age shoulda had. But sometimes that does somethin’ to a person that can’t be undone. And they wanna do to other people what was done to them, you understand?”

Will furrowed his brow. “You think Hannibal would, ah… would *hurt* me?”

“Not you, no.” She sighed, taking the pot from him. “G’on. We can talk about this later.” Catching his chin, she gave him a kiss and he disappeared into the woods, taking his usual shortcut back to the Fontenot place.

Will had his own pallet in Hannibal’s bedroom, but sometimes when it was late and they were up talking, they slept in the same bed. Hannibal was in his pajamas, sketchbook balanced on his knees. Will kicked off his trousers and crawled onto the mattress in his underwear and tee-shirt. Hannibal smiled at him and showed him the sketch. Lately they’d been learning about the Trojan War, and Hannibal had drawn Will as a Myrmidon warrior brandishing a spear dripping with blood. Will laughed delightedly. “How’d you learn to draw so good?” he asked, shaking his head in delighted disbelief.

Hannibal carefully tore the picture from the book and handed it to him. “Merry Christmas,” he said.

“I got somethin’ for you, too. It ain’t much, but…” He got up and retrieved the gift from his trouser pocket. It was a cicada he’d whittled. Murasaki said all gentlemen and ladies should have an artistic pursuit, and Will was surprised to learn that whittling could be considered an art.

Hannibal took the wooden insect with trembling fingers and turned it over and over in his hands before sliding it under his pillow. Instead of the knife he usually kept there.

“Hey, I got an idea,” Will said, jumping out of bed again. “Let’s go set a Yule fire like the pagans did. Gotta let that, uhm… that *steam* out, right?”

Grinning, Hannibal nodded yes and they crept out of the house, not bothering to do more than pull on boots and jackets.

They’d made campfires before, and everything needed was in the fort. It took a little time to find enough dry wood, but soon they had a pyre larger than the usual little blazes they set more to keep the mosquitoes at bay than to keep warm. There was something deliciously sinful about this particular witchcraft. He felt connected to some greater universal understanding, that this ritual was just as valid and meaningful – or just as useless and trite – as any church service or ancestor worship. Good and evil were just points of view.

As the balefire blazed, they chased each other around it, laughing, tackling each other. Hannibal was bigger, but Will was quicker, which made them an even match. They tussled, wrestled a bit, a smidge of playful jiu jitsu, which in and of itself was a rebellion – Murasaki had been very firm when she said that it was only used for self defense in truly dangerous situations. The competition became strangely frenetic. Will had a feeling circling in him that he couldn’t recognize. It was like a big black bird wheeling in the sky, casting its shadow to

the earth, but the species was unidentifiable, so large it was almost supernatural, like the legends of the Thunderbird. It made his stomach feel like it was dropping into his pelvis. Confusing. He both wanted to pin Hannibal and win, and didn't mind being pinned by him. "A'ight, uncle, uncle," Will said quickly, tapping out before things in his brain and body got more mixed up.

They stretched out on the grass at last, breathing hard and soaked with sweat that quickly cooled in the 50-odd degree night. Will felt purged, free, wildly at peace. "Y'know, ah… Cicero's method of loci?" he asked, staring up at the clouds as they pulled apart to admit starlight. Hannibal nodded. "The memory palace. You build it to remember facts, but I been thinkin' dat you could do other things with it. Instead of usin' it to memorize everything dat happened in the Punic Wars, you could keep people and places inside it." Will closed his eyes, feeling the warmth of the dying fire and the pure presence of the human laying beside him. "Imma keep this one," he murmured, replaying the evening over and over in his mind as if he could record it on film.

"Could you lock some of the doors?" Hannibal's voice was faint, whispery, but Will sat up like a shot. That was one of the longest phrases he'd said yet.

"Sure, why not? Put things in there you don't wanna see an' just… wall 'em up. Like *Montresor* did with Fortunato, not the other 'way round, Miss Caroline," Will sneered up at the heavens. Then, "You got things you wanna wall up, don't you?"

Hannibal nodded.

After the fire had died down, they put it out and went home, creeping back inside, pausing to wash their hands and faces. In bed, Hannibal pulled out his sketchbook and showed Will some more drawings. "Father," he said, showing Will a portrait of a man with a square face and wide cheekbones. "Mother." A beautiful woman with piles of dark hair. "Mischa." He flipped the page to a picture of a little girl with curly hair and a dimpled smile.

"Your little sister?" Hannibal nodded.

"She's… they're all gone, aren't they?"

Hannibal nodded again.

The pendulum sliced over Will's mind. "And you saw it all," he murmured.

Hannibal nodded. He flipped to another page, showing five men menacing a young girl who looked like Mischa.

"Those are the men who hurt her." Will could feel Hannibal's burning antipathy. "You don't want to forget their faces – w-why?"

"Because I'm going to kill them," Hannibal said, just above a whisper.

Will pursed his lips a moment, then nodded. "All right, then."

Hannibal looked at him as if waiting for Will to say more.

“If I could find the f-fucking Nazi that shot my mama, I’d kill him dead,” Will rasped fiercely.

“How would you do it?” Hannibal edged closer to him on the bed.

“With my hands,” Will said, firmly resolute. “H-he was up in some tree somewhere half a mile away shooting people – so far he couldn’t, ah, see their faces when they died o-or see the blood or smell the bodies. It’s goddamn cowardly is what it is. No, I’d do it with my hands, lookin’ him square in the eye.”

They fell asleep that night facing each other, fingers laced together.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Granny G and Hannibal have a heart-to-heart.

June 1950

Will is still asleep, but I hear his grandmother in the kitchen making coffee and chicory. I slip inside the small, cluttered house, breathing in the scent of her beverage and the bunches of dried herbs that hang from the ceiling, mixed with the soap she uses.

" *Bonjour* ," she says absently, peeling shrimp. It's Saturday morning, so we will have shrimp and grits for breakfast.

I pull a valerian root out of my pocket and set it on the counter next to where she is working. She eyes it, then looks at me. "Don't need it no more, *cher* ?"

I shake my head. Granny G said I was to sleep with it under my pillow to dispel my nervousness. At the cottage, I have Will's cicada. I've removed that as well, setting it at my bedside to be admired instead of hidden as some kind of totem against the dreams.

I still have the dreams. But sometimes, most of the time, in fact, I realize I am dreaming. Sometimes I can wake myself up. Other times I simply try to make as much noise as possible, knowing Will will hear me.

Without being told, I take down the cast-iron skillet and open the icebox, starting the bacon. She watches me with one eye, the other on her own work. I follow the steps effortlessly, frying the bacon, slicing the onions and mincing the garlic. When the shrimp are cleaned she adds them to the bacon grease and I saute those as well, careful not to overcook them. Then it's time to make the roux and thicken the gravy. She watches as I boil water for the grits and keep an eye on it even as I stir and simmer the shrimp mixture.

Cooking makes my mind very quiet. It feels serene and domestic. I know it's supposed to be women's work, but Granny G has never dissuaded my interest. In fact, she made the apron I'm wearing.

Breakfast will be ready soon. Granny G puts a pitcher of orange juice on the table, resting it on the gingham cloth that covers the scarred surface. I turn off the burners and stir to make sure everything is mixed and nothing is sticking to the bottom of the pan.

“Listen here, *cher* ,” she says, stopping me before I can retrieve the plates from the dry hutch. “I gotta tell you somethin’. More like somethin’ I gotta say.”

I look her steadily in the eyes and wait.

“You seen some awful things, sugar. What no child oughta see, what no child oughta live through. And Will, no doubt he’s helpin’ you. It’s his way to nurture. But listen now, I need you to swear to me that you’ll take care of him when the time comes. ‘Cause I won’t be there.” Her voice speaks of tears, but her eyes are resolute and clear. “And that might mean,” she went on, “protecting him from *you* . You understand me?”

This poor woman sees so much and yet so little. If she only knew what her grandson is capable of. I see his potential, his true potential, and all I want is for him to realize it. How could I feel otherwise about someone I love?

But I make the promise easily enough. I would never harm Will. I only want him to be his best self, the way he’s helped me regain the self that I’d lost.

Granny G dips her finger in the gravy and brings it to her lips. “Mmm,” she compliments. “You’re learnin’, and fast.”

“Thank you,” I say. Mastering a new skill brings the joy of competence.

“How about next time I teach you to make beignets?”

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Fireworks bring out a trauma response in Hannibal, but Will is there for him.

July 1950

"No, that's not how you do it – watch this." Will stops me from biting the top of my beheaded waffle cone. He lifts the point of his own to his mouth and tilts his head back, exposing his long, shapely throat. Biting out the bottom point of the cone, he sucks noisily, drawing the remains of the ice cream down, funneling it into his mouth. Swallows, then looks at me through the empty cone like it's a spyglass. "C'mon, you do it!"

Dutifully, I slow my pace and lift the cone to make it into a funnel. We're walking back from town. Will's bicycle has a flat tire and the new one won't come in to the hardware store until next week. It's the anniversary of America's independence from its colonial oppressors, which Will says he doesn't care about considering these supposed freedom fighters turned around and kept slaves, but there was an ice cream stand in the town square in honor of the occasion. We ate two cones each on the Baptist church steps and bought another for the walk home along the gravel roads.

"I'm gon' have a bellyache," Will sighs, rubbing his slender midsection with remorse. "But that truck don't come but once a year."

We're crunching through the remains of our cone-funnels when we hear a car engine and dutifully move to the side of the road, less than a foot from where the tall grass sways in the hot wind. Normally, cars slow to a crawl when they pass us; most people stare out their windows at the two bayou boys that don't attend school, raised feral by a Jap and a witch. Or, they slow down and talk to us, shooting the breeze, asking after Will's grandmother, wanting to know how Beau Graham fares in Biloxi.

This car accelerates, flinging gravel. Will and I turn to see a rusted pickup packed to the brim with young men clutching beer cans and whiskey bottles, laughing and shouting. Will fixes them with a baleful stare as they shout several epithets at us. But one of them has something red in his hand and flings it at our feet.

The firecracker explodes, pelting our bare legs with gravel.

And I am no longer on a back road in rural Louisiana. I am standing in the snow with Mischa's mittened hand in mine, watching my father speak to the man leaning out of the

Soviet tank. Then I hear the scream of the Stuka as it falls from the sky to drop its payload. The tank explodes in a fireball that engulfs my mother and father where they stand. This is the first time I smell the unmistakable odor of cooking human flesh and I can smell it now just over the remnants of burning oil and diesel.

I am laying in the snow where the concussion threw me off my feet. But someone is laying on top of me, their body a warm, comforting weight, clinging to me, stroking my hair back from my forehead.

The gray Lithuanian sky, shot through with sparks and snowflakes, gradually fades from my vision. Instead, I see the sapphire expanse above me lively with clouds that drift lazily from one end of the horizon to the other. I hear the insects sing in Calliope's harmony. I can hear Will. I can feel Will, smell him, the sticky sweetness of his breath, the lingering hints of ice cream on his lips. I cling to him.

It takes me what feels like a very long time to realize I am hyperventilating, gasping in my breath, clinging to Will as though we're about to be flung from each other, ripped apart by a hurricane. He has me weighted down on the soft bed of tall grasses, his body pressed over mine, his head tucked under my chin. I push my face into his hair and I breathe him in, that familiar, comforting scent of his that I've begun to crave like air, lavender and mint and Ivory soap, a hint of talcum, and his own unique blend of the outdoors and fresh sweat.

My breathing slows. At last, he sits back on his knees, removing his weight in increments, studying my face for a reaction. "You're okay," he promises me hurriedly. "We're okay. It's just a couple scrapes, a'ight, we're fine, *c'est bon* ."

He rocks back further and takes my hands to help me rise from the matted grass. I bend at the waist and look into his eyes. They brim with softness and concern.

And then I come apart. A sob rips free and my body is possessed by my grief like a demon. They are Legion and I'm speaking in tongues, strains of Lithuanian and Italian and English and then it is only weeping, my face pressed into the damp fabric of his shirt collar. He holds me tight and rocks me back and forth, instinctively knowing what I need more than anything else, murmuring meaningless words in a cadence of comfort.

Somehow, time has passed. We're further away from the road, out of sight, sitting with our backs to a cypress tree that trails with ghostly Spanish moss. Will is telling me the legend of the moss's origin for what has to be the third or fourth time, pressing some into my hand to fidget with as my sobs dissolve into hiccups and then hitched sighs.

I've never loved him more than I do right now. This brings fresh tears and I don't have any words that can explain it or actions that can express it. He puts his arm around me and I sink against him, crumpling. I lay my head in his lap, clutching his legs, scraped and oozing a little blood from the explosion of what must have been some kind of firecracker, the gravel shooting against us like shrapnel.

A piece of twisted metal from the tank's armor bisected my mother's head a fraction of a second before the explosion cooked her flesh from her bones. I like to think it was a mercy,

that the severing of her brain meant she didn't feel the rush of heat and the all-consuming agony. A mercy my father was not granted. I heard the scream.

The shadows are long when I come back to myself, and my body is walking, following Will, holding his hand. We stop at the edge of the swimming hole, which is blissfully vacant despite the heat. Everyone's at the football field to watch the fireworks.

Will patiently undresses me, leaving my clothes in an untidy pile with his own. His face is sad serenity. When we're down to our underwear, he leads me to the shore and brings over the old rope suspended from the oak tree above. "Go on," he orders with gentle firmness. I don't move. He picks up my hands and wraps them around the rope. "Let's go together," he suggests.

I let him guide me back up the slope a bit to get a running start. " *Un, deux, tois!* "

We sprint madly toward the lake, four hands clutching the rope, our combined weight launching us in a wide, swinging arc. Physics flings us out over the water, glistening with the last crushed gold of the day's sun. We plunge inelegantly into the brown water with noisome splashes. I find him beneath the water and we rise together, sputtering and gasping.

We swim back to where we can touch the murky bottom and tread water, our feet sliding for purchase on slimy stones. "I wanna tell you something," he says.

I nod, water dripping from my hair into my eyes.

"Before my mama went into the nursing corps, she, ah… s-she w-walked *out* on me and my dad," Will reveals, then bites his lip as if he could have trapped the confession inside. "And now we don't *never* talk about it. It's like we, ah… we started all keepin' the same secret without plannin' to, Granny and Daddy and I." He blows water away from his upper lip. His blue eyes are bloodshot in the corners and I watch him swallow hard several times before he speaks again. "I'm sorry. I shoulda just been true from the start, but, ah… it's… like I'm speakin' ill of the dead, I don't know."

He disappears underwater for what feels like a long time before surfacing, tossing his hair and spraying me with crystal droplets.

"When they killed my sister, they ate her," I say.

Instead of staring at me with shock and horror, his face only emotes a broken heart on Mischa's behalf.

"They gave me soup. I was hungry."

He nods slowly. Now the broken heart on his sleeve is for me.

He wraps his wet arms around my neck and holds me tight. I cling to him, our bare chests together, hearts beating against the cages of our ribs trying to reach one another.

Then he catches me off guard and dunks me under. I surface with a gasp to his teasing laughter, then chase him across the water to return the favor.

This is my baptism.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Hannibal leaves for Paris... without Will.

October 1950

Beau, I'm writing this because I hope seeing the words on paper will bring you to your senses.

Let Will go to Paris. Just sign the form so he can get his passport. I know it's no small thing, letting your boy leave the country. I know. I let my boy – that's you – live in Biloxi and if I'm lucky I get a call on my birthday.

Do you think I want him to go? Of course not. I love this child. I had him half the time you and Charlotte were together, then the entire war until you came home. Then you stuck around what, six months? Off you went so you could drink in peace, leaving me begging for you to send money. He's more my son than yours. There, I said it.

I don't know how it happened but you and Charlotte created a special boy. A genius boy. He has a chance now to go to Paris, go to the finest schools, rub elbows with writers and artists and philosophers and politicians. He could change the world. Either way, he'll get out of Bayou Bend.

Just sign the paper. Better yet, write a letter giving up your parental rights and let me have them. I'm his mother in all but the legal sense.

If you don't do this for Will, you don't love him and you never did.

And if you keep being unreasonable, you know what I'll have to do. I will use every power at my disposal to curse you.

I love you, even if you're an idiot. Please do the right thing.

They sat together on the fallen tree where they'd met, staring out at the bayou. Not fishing. Not talking. Just letting the darkness come, settling in among the cypress, darkening the black mirrored swamp and filling the double image with shadows.

The fireflies woke. Thousands, signaling their mates in an endless search to fulfill their destinies.

“Back at the castle,” Hannibal said, breaking the white noise symphony of insect-song, “before the Nazis came, my mother was teaching me to keep cochlear gardens.”

“*Bigarno*?”

Hannibal nodded. “I would help her feed them grape vines and herbs to influence their taste. Some we kept outside to attract fireflies.”

“Givin’ the larvae somethin’ to eat,” Will said.

“They multiplied spectacularly,” Hannibal told him. “And we had fireflies like this. It isn’t common in Lithuania.”

Will closed his eyes, recreating the scene around him in his mind. He felt Hannibal’s hand rest on the small of his back, then curl around his hip. “Making another room in your memory palace?”

Will nodded.

“I’ll add it to mine as well, and I’ll see you there.”

Will’s lip trembled out of his control. He’d been crying off and on like a little baby girl for the last week and he was tired of it. Now that Hannibal’s mind was so much steadier than when he’d arrived in Lafayette parish over a year ago, he was the one comforting Will, stepping into his role as the older of the two. But Will had the pendulum in his mind, and he knew what Hannibal was keeping inside of him. Desperation and terror that if they parted, he was going to relapse back into suffering voicelessness and endless nightmares.

“You’re gonna be okay,” Will promised him with a sniffle, resting his head on Hannibal’s shoulder. “You know that, don’cha? You got strong down here, and you got Granny’s magic on you. I’m not sayin’ it won’t be, ah… a tough road, b-but you got your auntie and I can tell she really wants you to be all right.”

A laden silence. Then, Will added, “and it won’t be long. I know my daddy’s gonna come ‘round. Granny G will get ‘im, don’t you worry.”

But Will was worried. He knew that his father, despite his absenteeism and drinking, did love Will. Wanted to be a father, even if now he was in no shape to do it. Didn’t want Will to see him like this. Ashamed about being the man that Charlotte had abandoned, wanted to leave so badly that she fled to the nursing corps, willing to leave her child behind. As if Will’s mother was a martyr and was, herself, blameless. Will knew a formal gesture of relinquishing his role as a father was not something Beau would take lightly. He might never agree, and that meant Will had to wait six whole years to be eighteen and have the right to leave the country without his father’s permission.

The thought hollowed him out like a rotted log.

And he was crying again. “Sorry I keep bawlin’,” he muttered, rubbing his face on the bandana he kept in his back pocket.

“You told me, at this very place, that it was acceptable for boys to cry. Jesus wept. The Greek myths are full of the tears of the gods, enough to fill the sea.”

“Well, this ain’t the holy land, and it sure ain’t Mt. Olympus,” Will said crossly, even though his anger was misdirected.

Later, they lay down on the makeshift bedding they kept pushed together on the screened-in porch. Evinrude had just finished kneading Hannibal’s stomach and abandoned them, too hot for any more affection, choosing to stretch out on the loveseat instead.

“What am I gonna do?” Will murmured in the dark as they faced each other. “Back to public school and… all the goddamn idiots in this town w-with their… tiny little stunted brains…?”

“You write,” Hannibal told him. “You call. You know I will.”

Will sighed. Nodded. “Guess we, ah… better get some shuteye. You got a long day tomorrow.” Monsieur Fontenot was going to drive the Lecters to New Orleans tomorrow where they were scheduled to board a ship bound for England. “I should just stow away,” he muttered.

“Sounds like an adventure,” Hannibal said. This time, his voice quivered.

“I’m gonna miss you so much,” Will blurted.

Hannibal looked at him, dark eyes catching the weak moonlight that filtered in through the screens. He slid over on his small mattress, making enough room for Will if he squeezed. Despite the heat, Will wiggled on for what he thought was going to be a long hug. It was, sort of, but it didn’t stop. He was being held, one arm draped around Hannibal’s waist, his head resting on Hannibal’s pillow and outstretched bicep. Pulled close, pressed together, Hannibal’s face resting against his forehead and hair, their legs tangled together.

Will’s sorrow was gradually replaced by something else. They were each wearing their briefs only to combat the heat. Everywhere they touched was skin on skin. The warmth of the night brought Hannibal’s scent to his nose in strong, comforting waves – the European hair oil he used that smelled like herbs and fresh pine as well as the familiar notes of his living body that Will had come to know so well, the faintest wisp of the incense Lady Murasaki burned to honor her ancestors.

Will’s body felt hot and coiled like… something was going to happen. This was mixed, confusingly, with the deep serenity of being held in tenderness, and all of the things about Hannibal that filled his heart to the brim and made it runneth over.

He didn’t sleep for a long time, and he was pretty sure Hannibal wasn’t asleep either, though they didn’t speak. Eventually he realized he’d fallen asleep at some point, because they’d

shifted their positions, Will leaning away from him and Hannibal circling him from behind, still clutching him close, breathing against the back of his neck, a hand splayed out over Will's belly. They were both slick with sweat, but neither one let go.

And then it was morning. When Will realized the sun was up, his blood spiked, all full of broken glass. It was today. And today was the day Hannibal was leaving.

Hannibal was already awake, dressed, sitting on the loveseat with Evinrude. Will could smell coffee and chicory. "Why didn't you wake me up?" he demanded, feeling robbed of the last couple of hours they could have spent together.

Hannibal didn't answer, but he knelt down and sat across from Will on the mattress. Reaching out he cupped Will's cheek in one long hand. "I promise you will come to Paris," he said. "And you know I always keep my promises."

Will nodded. Hannibal did. He didn't give his word lightly.

"This is goodbye for now. Not forever."

"I know," Will said, though with a rising tide of misery.

A car horn honked from the road outside. Granny G appeared at the screen door leading into the house. "I'm sorry, *cher* . It's time, honey."

"Yes, ma'am," Will said, voice disintegrating as tears threatened again.

Hannibal stood and held out a hand, helping Will to his feet as Granny G disappeared back into the house and out the front door to say her goodbyes to Murasaki and Chiyoh, which Will had done the night before.

They embraced for a long time. Long enough for the car horn to honk again and for Will to mutter a curse under his breath aimed at Monsieur Fontenot.

Hannibal touched his face again. Since Hannibal had come, Will had been to the movies more than he'd ever gone since Murasaki was more than happy to pay. He'd seen how Bogart lovingly caressed Lauren Bacall's or Ingrid Bergman's face before…

This *was* a caress.

And now it was *the moment*, the bayou's insects providing the dramatic swell of music as the movie's score hit its stunning conclusion.

Hannibal kissed him. On the mouth. A lingering press of lips. Closed, but undoubtedly romantic. The message unmistakable.

When it ended, Will was trembling, his nerves on fire, that strange feeling, being fraught with a need he couldn't express consuming every part of him. Without thinking, he put his hands on Hannibal's shoulders and rose up on his toes to do it again.

The horn blared once more. Hannibal wrapped Will in an embrace so tight he couldn’t breathe, and then tore himself away, banging out the screen door and disappearing around the side of the house.

Will knelt back down on the mattress, stunned and thrilled, elated and devastated. He heard the crunch of gravel as the car drove away.

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

> Enclosed within are only a handful of the hundreds of letters that crossed the Atlantic between Hannibal and Will. Arranged in chronological order, though the exact dates were not included.

October 1950 - April 1954

Hundreds of Letters…

Dear Will,

Hearing your voice over the phone was, I'm afraid, the only thing that staved off a breakdown upon our arrival back in Paris. Thank you for taking my call, despite the time difference. I have found my adjustment period to be reasonable. Sleep does not come easily and I'm bored to tears without you, but I have kept my wits about me and my voice hasn't disappeared.

I hope your grandmother works quickly, through magic or otherwise. So much has changed since we left. The city seems to have a breath of fresh air blowing through it that is stirring it to life after the war. The couturiers and fashion industry seem back in full force. Tourists have returned and the museums are open. All the jazz will make you feel right at home. Everything is perfect except you aren't here.

If your passport situation is resolved quickly, there will still be enough time to enroll you in Archambault Academy with me and have your uniform made. My aunt and Chiyoh say hello. Enclosed are some drawings I made at the Louvre.

Sincerely, your friend,

Hannibal Lecter

PS: I will call you again on Sunday, 1:00 PM your local time.

Dear Hannibal,

Still no word from my daddy. Granny says we might take the bus to Biloxi and go see him in person. I can't stand it. I've been at the library reading Louisiana state law to find out if

there's any way around this, if I could emancipate myself or Granny G could hire a lawyer to force him to sign.

Going back to public school was awful. I learned to keep my mouth shut and just do my work, so the teachers aren't the problem. It's the other students. I'm gone for a year and suddenly all the girls are having some kind of competition as to who can be the meanest and the boys have grown ten feet and have faces covered in spots, which must anger them to no end, because everyone's either flirting, or in a perpetual bad mood. I just want to hide in the back of the room and do my time like a good prisoner, but they won't let me. Every day it's some clod-hopper with only two brain cells to rub together pushing me into a locker or asking me if I'm a boy or a girl on account of looking so pretty. It's next to impossible not to use what Murasaki taught us. So far I haven't, but the whole damn school is spoiling for a fight.

I miss you. I have never been so miserable in my entire life, even after my mama left or when my daddy got arrested the first time. I want to come to Paris so bad it makes me want to scream. If I'm not careful, I'll end up in a padded room somewhere.

Talk to you soon, I'll be waiting for your call.

Will

Dear Will,

Our situation in Paris continues to improve. My uncle has regained full access to the family fortune and recovered many priceless artifacts that were stolen from our castle in Lithuania. His business continues to thrive and we are more than comfortable. The city is constantly under construction, but this is a good thing. What I would give to have you here. I would show you my favorite neighborhood brasserie, feed you pain au chocolat until you were fit to burst. I would take you to the caveaus to hear jazz every night. Opera by day. And if we lacked for nature, we can take the train down to the riviera and swim in the ocean.

It's been almost a year, Will. You have to come. I may write about the glories of Paris but it's only to alleviate my suffering.

I need you, Will.

Hannibal,

Like I told you over the phone last weekend, everything here resembles a pile of steaming dog shit.

Dad still won't sign the damn paper.

In better news, I got suspended for two weeks. I'm not clear on how that's supposed to be a punishment. I hate being in school and now I have a vacation. Terry Lane's older brother was

in the car that Fourth of July when they threw the fireworks at us. And for some reason, over two years later, he decided to bring it up in homeroom.

I think you'll be pleased to know that although Terry Lane is over six feet tall and built like a brick shithouse, he knows fuck-all about ju jitsu. You should have heard him bawling. I wish you could have seen it.

This isn't fair. After what happened to you, and some of the things that happened to me with my mama and everything, God lets us meet and then you have to go home and I can't come with you. Well, not home, but back to your uncle. Please don't think I'm angry with Murasaki for wanting to go to her husband. Your lives are in Paris. I get it.

I think you told me once that God is beyond measure in his wanton malice and matchless in his irony. You and I are living examples.

I don't know what to do without you. I'm terrified that when I finally see you again you won't even recognize me or I won't recognize you, or something will be different. I hate this.

Have fun at the cinema with those friends from your class. Let me know how the movie is.

-Will

Dear Will,

What a luxury it was to speak for so long on the 5th. Again, happy birthday, and I hope you enjoy the presents I sent.

I've spoken with my uncle again about getting some money together to offer your father. I hate to think about the concept of assigning monetary worth to someone I consider priceless, but how much do you think your father would need to agree to sign over his rights? Ballpark figure, as you Americans say. I'll find a way to get the money. I promise.

We'll celebrate your next birthday in Paris.

All my love,

Hannibal

Dear Hannibal,

Writing from Biloxi. Living with my father again is torture of the Spanish Inquisition variety. He quit drinking, which is good, but all he eats is hamburgers and bologna sandwiches and hardboiled eggs. He's a terrible housekeeper and I miss Granny something fierce. But if he insists on keeping his parental rights then he's stuck with me. I'm torn between hoping he kicks me out sooner rather than later and sort of… I mean, he is my dad. I don't know. He's

way too goddamn stubborn, but he's not a terrible person. And as far as I can tell, he's been sober this whole time since I moved in.

High school in Biloxi. At least nobody knows me.

I'm enclosing the number of a payphone next to the library. Call me there instead of at my dad's place. I got the feeling he was listening in last time and I don't trust him to understand us.

Oh, that's right – we speak French and Latin and some Japanese. We'll just switch languages on him. Never mind, then, call me here for the time being.

Thanks again for the drawings. Can you do a self portrait? Or send a picture? I can see you in the memory palace, but I'm terrified that it's the 13-year-old you and you'll look so different when I finally get to see you again.

Love, Will

Will,

I want to apologize for my tone during our last telephone call. It was not my intention to make it seem as though I'm not happy that your situation in Biloxi has improved. Your father has stayed true to his word, and I'm glad your relationship has gotten incrementally better as a result. Also the girl — I think you said her name is Molly — who asked you to accompany her to your school's spring formal seems like a kind person and a true friend. Joining the clubs you mentioned — chess, AV, science — has afforded you the opportunity to meet more like-minded and intelligent individuals than Lafayette Parish had to offer. These are all good things. Perhaps they have eased your loneliness. I too have engaged in socialization as necessary.

But I have found it near impossible to hide anything from you. I let you know me and see me and even if all you have is my voice over thousands of miles, I know that you know my true feelings. I've always strived to tell you the truth in my own way. I still have trouble expressing myself verbally from time to time and last Tuesday's call was one such instance.

You must know that I'm riddled with doubts and fears. I have intrusive, swirling thoughts that bring me constant pain. I worry you'll forget about me. That you have ceased your labors of emancipation. That you are losing your interest in coming to Paris. It's been almost three years now since I've laid eyes on you, and much has changed in both of our worlds. My uncle is dead. Your father is sober and owns his own business. I'm nearly finished at the academy, and you're accompanying young ladies to formal dances.

There is nothing constant in life aside from change. I know this. And yet I've picked up the time travel equations again. I want to go back. I would gladly accept the nightmares and the loss of my voice to return to the time we spent together in Bayou Bend. I want to reverse time and watch the shattered teacup come back together again.

Will, if I could choose one miracle, I would wish that you would, in a flash and puff of smoke, appear beside me right this second. I would choose that particular magic over bringing back my family. My terror lies in the possibility that, given the same opportunity to choose a miracle, you wouldn't wish for the same thing.

I love you, Will. I have to ask, in an unadorned, ungraceful way, do you love me?

-Hannibal

Dear Hannibal,

I'm sorry I missed our last call. And that I didn't write until now. I didn't know how to say what I wanted to say without sounding angry. I WAS angry. Now it just hurts. So much. Unlike anything I've ever felt. I can't believe you would think that I'd forget about you. That I've moved on. That I don't close my eyes every goddamn night and race into the memory palace, slamming the door shut on the outside world. Just because I'm coping doesn't mean I'm not miserable.

You understand me like nobody else. I've never known myself as well as I know myself when I'm with you. That will never change.

The pain now is regret, remorse, some word deeper than that. I'm sick with it. The fact that I said things to you in such a way to make you think that I wasn't interested in coming to Paris anymore is tearing me up. I'm so, so sorry I let you have a shadow of a doubt. I hate the thought of you wondering if I still care about you.

If we were physically together, and you could look at my face and I could look at yours as we talk, I know this confusion never would have happened. When we're together, we're conjoined. We're conjoined even now, but time and distance is trying to sever us. I don't know if either of us would survive the separation. Let that answer the question at the end of your letter.

Please call next Tuesday night. I promise I'll pick up.

Love, Will

Dear Will,

Again, I apologize for my part in our recent miscommunication. Discussing it over the phone has solidified my confidence in our connection. You're right. We are conjoined. And nothing is going to separate us. Right now, you and I are forced into person-suits, where we must go through the motions of normalcy to make things easier for ourselves and the few people in our lives we care for aside from one another.

At last, Murasaki has allowed me to go through my uncle's papers. He'd been clandestinely collecting information about the incident that killed my parents and what happened to

Mischa. Once you arrive, we can continue his work. I've also contacted his former colleagues in regards to your query.

I sent this letter to Granny G's assuming it would be waiting for you when you arrived. I hope my timing was correct. I'll try to call at our usual time.

Love,

Hannibal

Dear Hannibal,

Again, happy happy 18th birthday. Extra happy since you're not a US citizen and don't have to worry about being drafted for the next war good old America dreams up. Joyeux anniversaire, wish I'd been there. It sounds like Murasaki threw you quite the bash. Dance with any pretty girls? You know I'm teasing. But if you did, it's all right. Person-suit, I understand.

Granny G's house is nearly done. She's kept me working so hard I fall asleep at night the second my head hits the pillow, so I haven't seen you in the memory palace lately. But the house has new paint, new shutters, new roof. I just need to hang the doors and seal the windows. That old garden shed out back blew over in the hurricane, good riddance to that ugly thing. I'm fixing to build her another one. She says there's plenty of money, thanks to your aunt helping us.

I'm sorry to let you know that Evinrude passed in her sleep last week. She was purring up until the last. Didn't even know she was poorly. I'm not ashamed to say that I cried, probably harder than a man should for a cat, but she always reminded me of you. I'd hear that motor and think about the first night you – let's be honest – broke into my house just to invite yourself to a sleepover. Now that I'm back in Bayou Bend, sleeping on the porch, sometimes when I wake up and I'm in that half-awake-half-asleep place, I think you're lying next to me.

I was worried about coming here for the summer, about how it'd be with Granny now that I'm practically grown, but it feels wonderful. Everywhere I look I get to think of you. I even went out to the old fort and fixed it up, even though I'm too big to sit in it anymore. I'd like to think some other boys will find it someday and play there.

I've got my eye on Monsieur Fontenot's old Plymouth. His cataracts have gotten so bad he can't drive anymore, and Miss Fontenot – who is, I'm happy to report, still unaware that you and I perpetrated the watermelon heist – got an settlement for some face cream that burned her skin real bad, and used it to buy a brand new Ford pickup. I've got a brainchild to make an offer on the Plymouth and tune it up for Granny to have. Of course, I'll have to teach her to drive it. That ought to be a gas.

Wish you were here, of course. Can you drive? I just assumed in Paris you could take the metro anywhere you wanted to go. I'll teach you someday, if you don't know how.

Love, Will

Dear Will,

Murasaki has not made any further calls, and has said nothing to me, but I'm sure I heard her talking to your father on the telephone last Friday. I've tried interrogating Chiyoh, but she is in her element, between iron and silver. And yet there is a glimmer in her eyes these days that seems uncharacteristically charged with excitement. Perhaps it is that she'll be starting at the Sorbonne soon. Having learned all she can from Murasaki but with no family to return to in Japan, she plans to remain in Paris and make a life for herself. We are her family now, and that includes you, Will.

But I digress – has there been movement on your end? I know you've been in Bayou Bend but perhaps Granny G has said something to you, or been in contact with your father?

I feel as though we are on the cusp of something.

I'm going to post this now to catch the mailman.

Love, H

Will,

This is your dad. This won't be long and it won't be full of fancy words. I wanted you to have something you could read again and again when you're gone. I am adding your grandmother as a legal guardian. I am not getting rid of my rights. But she is a full guardian now. Which means she can get you the passport and you can go to France.

You coming to Biloxi to live with me made me change. Wanting to be your daddy and do it right made me change. It saved me. And this summer I saw how much work you put in at Granny's to fix the house. Giving her the car so she can take better care of herself. You're a good boy, Will. You will be a better man than I ever was.

If you think moving to Paris will make you happy, I want you to do it. I will miss you every day and I will pray for you every night. I hope the Lecters will let you come home once in a while to see me, and you will give your old man a phone call or a letter every so often.

My daddy never told me he was proud of me. He died and he never said he loved me. Well, you got it in writing. William James Graham. My son. I am proud of you and I love you.

Sincerely, your father, Beau Louis Graham

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

At last, Will arrives in Paris.

tw: This chapter contains sex between a 16 and 18 year old.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Paris, September 1954

Will is breathtaking. In the literal and figurative sense. I have forgotten to breathe. Watching him walk toward me, the other travelers parting for him like the Red Sea, I hear nothing but my pulse as it pounds through my skull. I can feel it in my fingertips, my mouth barren again, dry as a desert. I am rendered mute not by indescribable pain but choked by the most intense sensation of joy I've ever known. It is sublime, a composition beyond Mozart or Beethoven or any of the great masters.

When he catches sight of me, the suitcases slip out of his hands and hit the floor with twin thuds. The school photos he's sent me were criminally pathetic representations of his beauty. The blue shirt he's wearing, wrinkled from the flight, sleeves rolled up, reflects in the warm Aegean-sea of his eyes, a color impossible to capture on film. Alas, society has convinced him to cut those long swamp-tangled curls, shaving up the back of his head but leaving a bit more on top than the average cheap crew cut. His dark hair refuses to be tamed and I can't wait to touch it again where it is unruly from the airplane.

He's still smaller than me, though much taller than when I left. He still has a child's sweetness to his face, the biological expression of traits that encourage feelings of affection and protection. His hands are a man's hands, calloused and strong, his forearms roped with muscle and tendon.

His beautiful mouth has only become more enticing and his smile gives me what I assume is the same physical experience the victim of a lightning strike would undergo. I am burned apart by plasma, split like an old tree, consumed with fire.

Will leaps into my arms with such force I nearly topple us both to the ground. We're both laughing like madmen. I catch my breath just long enough to press my face against his neck and shoulder and inhale. Beneath the cloud of cheap aftershave I scent his essence and it fills me like manna from the gods.

Chiyoh murmurs to us when the embrace goes on for longer than it should. She's right. Not here. We part, share a manly handshake, gather up Will's suitcases and hurry out to the waiting car where Chiyoh does accept a kiss on the cheek from Will in greeting, content, it seems, with being an afterthought.

My nerves blaze and my stomach and heart are confused about which organ ought to do what. Will is here. Will is in the back of the hired car with me, talking a mile a minute, looking out the window and peppering me with a barrage of questions about the city as it slides by. I am not looking at Paris. I can't take my eyes off of him. It's all I can do to stop myself from kissing him now, like I did on his grandmother's porch before we were parted.

Over the phone, we each shared our fears that we'd changed, that when reunited, something would be different, that our connection would have withered or morphed into something unrecognizable or unwelcome. Our fears were not entirely baseless. I do see him differently now. But the difference is I have fallen in love with him at first sight, with the blinding power of the phenomenon as described in old stories and popular songs and films. My cheeks burn; I can see my reflection in the rear view mirror and know how red my face is, my eyes fever-bright.

Our flat is large and well-appointed; we own the whole building now as prices fall. The middle class are fleeing to the outer ring of Paris, leaving the dilapidated city center behind. But we cannot abandon the cathedrals and the Louvre, Pont Neuf or the Latin Quarter. Chiyoh and I must be close to the Sorbonne, and Will to Archambault Academy. In an uncharacteristic gesture of affection, when Will has finished his bow, Murasaki pulls him into a hug. Then she takes Chiyoh and retires to her suite of rooms, leaving us alone.

I show Will our kitchen, where I've continued to practice the culinary arts despite the outdated appliances, the music room with my piano and harpsichord, the piles of sheet music, my compositions. The small room with the glass doors leading to the balcony is very cold in the winter, but I use it for an art studio. My bedroom – our bedroom, our own washroom with a worn but sizable clawfoot tub and shower hose. I cleared space for Will without hesitation, emptying drawers and half my closet, crowding the space with the added twin bed in addition to my full size. We'll have to share a desk and a typewriter, but I don't foresee any problem.

Any problem. Any worry, strife, uneasiness, fear. It's all gone. There is only the joy that is so inexpressible I find it unbearable.

Will isn't tired, he says, just hungry. We leave the unpacking for later. I have Will. We are in Paris. I have more money than I know what to do with, as Murasaki skillfully hides our assets from the government and takes opportunities when she can to sell off antiquities.

We buy sandwiches from a cart so we can walk and eat and we cover miles and miles before the sun goes down. Dinner at a brasserie, then jazz at the caveau, too much to drink. It seems impossible that I was ever mute. We chatter endlessly like old women at the market, barely pausing to breathe. I want to weave a cloak of his laughter to wrap myself in. I'd forgotten how he sometimes puts a hand on the place where his clavicles meet when he laughs hard enough, throwing back his head and showing me his strangely beautiful white teeth. Mine are nowhere near as straight.

Home at last. We stumble up to my room as the sun is coming up. We aren't drunk on wine so much as on each other. Will is exhausted from the travel and as soon as we enter, kicks off his shoes and collapses onto the closest bed, which happens to be mine. I hurry out of my clothes and slip on a pajama set before joining him. He's already asleep, but wakes up with a start when the bed moves. "Sorry," is his muffled apology.

I coax him to slide out of his trousers and belt and dress shirt and get under the covers. This is an old building and it can be quite drafty at night, even after a golden-warm fall day. Our long walking tour has burned off all the chemical tang of his cheap shaving lotion. "I must introduce you to a finer aftershave," I say and he laughs, a loose, exhausted sound.

And he is in my arms. I wonder if I am dreaming, or if I've died and this is my personal heaven. He's unconscious in seconds; I've worn him out thoroughly and his body is pliable, his sleep deep velvet bliss. I recline him on a pillow – on *his* side of the bed, I've decided just now – and lift his arm closest to me. I tuck myself beneath it, resting my head on his chest, pulling the quilt up to my chin and tucking it over his shoulder with my hand. I listen to his heart. Will's heart, expanding and contracting, his lungs doing the same, bringing the breath of God and the force of life through his body, a miracle with every inhale and exhale, every chamber pumping in the rhythm of existence. He's here. Will is here with me. I'm afraid to go to sleep. If I wake up and he's gone…?

Four years was an eternity, and yet it was no time at all. His physical form has changed and this should feel like sleeping with a stranger. But I'm lulled down in moments, my mind and body eased by a divine serenity, a kind of nirvana.

I rise just enough to kiss his cheek gently, then cuddle in close.

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I still have nightmares when it snows, but otherwise I generally sleep well. I thought. But sleeping against Will brings a kind of rejuvenated rest I had forgotten existed. I close my eyes and when I open them late morning sun streams through the curtains I didn't close last night. We've shifted just so in our sleep so we're facing one another, foreheads together.

Conjoined, of course. He wakes when I do, and his smile when he sees me is wide, genuine. Relieved. I'm sure he was worried, as I was, that all of this was a dream.

"Good morning," I say.

"Don't you mean *bonjour?* " he teases.

" *Bonjour* , then."

"Mornin'."

We chuckle. And then we slip into silence, facing each other, a kind of expectant stillness, a pregnant moment swollen and ready to give birth to something we've been waiting for,

desperately wishing for.

His arm slides beneath mine. I can feel his palm on my back. It sneaks along the navy silk until it finds the place where my shirt has ridden up, and settles on my bare skin. Inching us closer together. I touch his face, caressing it hesitantly before tracing my thumb down the contour of his neck. He looks so serious all of the sudden, the humor and play evaporated, high spots of color on his cheeks. I shift closer again.

He slips his hand up the back of my sleep shirt, tracing my vertebrae. Closer still. We are closing in, erasing the remaining space on the pillow between us.

He leans in, and our lips touch, reunited once more. The breath of his life whispers over my face, flows into my mouth. My hand on his neck moves to his face again, grasping as if he'll try to get away, and he slings a leg over my thigh under the quilt. Kiss. Again. Again, and longer, lingering, sharing breath. I have no thoughts, no consciousness. All I know is his sweet taste, the heat of his mouth, his hand on my bare skin and the eager way he shifts closer and closer.

I don't know what to do. He's the only person I've ever kissed. I wonder if he experimented with the intermittent girlfriends he entertained to pass the time until we met again. I'm older. Should be wiser, should know how to please him, but I'm lost, helpless, at his mercy. I can feel myself trembling. He trembles as well, for a time, until a kind of masculine confidence – absolutely intoxicating – creeps through him and his touches and kisses become more sure. It makes his charm that much more potent and he flows through my veins like a drug or the heavenly venom from a snakebite.

His confidence is contagious. It dawns on me that there is nothing I can do to spoil this moment. Will is here. He is propped up on his elbow, kissing me, crushing my mouth like overripe fruit. I can hear the change in his breathing and feel his pulse through the soft skin of his neck. All the fantasies I constructed, imagining a moment like this, are nothing when held up to the real thing. The rose window of Notre Dame is dirty glass and

old light compared to the color of his eyes and the flush of his cheek, the dusky petals of his nipples and the way his lashes fan out, fluttering as he looks hungrily down at me.

My hand leaves his face, gliding down his bare chest. I stroke his flat belly, the silky skin, thumb grazing his navel. Now I've found the waistband of his white briefs. His desire is remarkably evident and he lets out a shaky breath when I cup him through the cotton, blindly fondling him. I can feel the subtle movement of his hips as he pushes himself into my palm.

He breaks the spell my touch has cast and tosses the blankets away, his fingers slipping the silk-covered buttons of my pajamas open. There's that mischievous half-smile I know so well as he laughs silently at his own haste. I reach behind my head and whisper it free, tossing it away as he descends on me, transmitting his hunger as he kisses my neck.

That is a feeling I will never forget. My lips are one thing, but my neck is quite another. I have a vague sense that I'm moments from being devoured and the threat of danger is intoxicating. He stops, and I whimper at the absence of sensation, only to sigh as he traces his fingers down my chest, across my belly, and then undresses me the rest of the way. I lay

there, mute again, but for an entirely different reason. I cannot form any words except his name, and this only whispered once just before he touches me. I moan, my hips rising unconsciously, pushing me through his grasp.

He leans over me now, kissing my mouth, flicking his tongue against mine as his hand moves. My hand is in his hair, relishing the texture I'd ached for, dreamed of. The passion coils in me, pools in my belly, building and building until my release.

It's never been like this before, the pleasure both physical and emotional. It's like I come twice. He's visibly pleased with himself, and he should be. Even in the aftermath of my powerful release, it isn't enough. I want to see him unmade by the same kind of pleasure he just gifted me. I turn him on his back swiftly and free him of the last stitch of clothing between us, my emissing dripping on him from my belly. His cock is more lovely than I could have hoped for, rising as if reaching towards me from the sparse dark curls of his early manhood. His eyes are hooded, his breaths begging. I touch him like he touched me, find a similar rhythm, spreading the beads of moisture down from the leaking head, relishing his uninhibited sounds and the way he grabs my shoulder and my thigh where I'm bent over him.

When he climaxes, he's the most beautiful he's ever been, petal lips parted, cheeks stained pink, eyes hooded before they drop closed, lashes resting on his cheeks like the dark wings of a nighttime insect drawn to the light. He whines out my name and I slow my hand and then hold him protectively, cupped in my palm, wet with his seed.

Our frenetic passion sated, I shift behind him and coil my body around his, yanking the quilt over us again, recreating the womb-like warmth that cradled us when we first woke. I kiss his hair, nuzzle the back of his neck, stroke down his backside and outer thigh, then slip my fingers along the inner side. My body won't believe the famine isn't over, that he won't disappear when I'm not looking. He angles back and kisses me through his deepening breaths.

And within minutes, he's asleep again. I smile against his neck and kiss the back of his ear, content, for a long time, to hold him like this as the light shifts from morning to midday.

I'm driven from the bed - our bed - to fulfill my promise to Granny G, even in the most rudimentary way. I leave him sleeping, slide into my pajama bottoms, and tiptoe to the kitchen. On the way I pass one of our two balconies and see Chiyoh staring down at the Seine, smoking a cigarette. She turns to me and the edge of her mouth curls up one tiny fraction of a centimeter.

I can smell Murasaki's ceremonial incense burning. The doors to her suite are shut. Just as well. I can only imagine what I look like, trailing a cloud of sex behind me. It must be evident what happened. I'm sure my face is slack and stupid with love, my eyes cloudy and besotted.

I fix coffee, and bring a tray back to the room with the French press, cream and sugar, fruit, brie, and baguette. When I return he's still fast asleep. I set the tray on my desk – our desk – and fix his coffee how he likes, with more sugar than is advisable. The sound of the spoon – a piece of family silver, decorated with the coat of arms – against the china wakes him at last.

“Hey,” he groans, raising a hand to protect himself from the sunlight flowing through my windows that overlook the river. “You’re not in bed. And you’re, ah… you're not naked anymore, what gives?”

I laugh. It comes freely and easily from my throat in a way I don’t think laughter ever has. I pour myself a cup as well and return to the bed, handing him his coffee before stripping again and sliding between the sheets. We prop ourselves up against the headboard with pillows. I’m anxious to see what Will thinks of our coffee – it’s still a terrible luxury, even though the war ended ten years ago. He sips and nods in approval, but admits, “I’m gon’ miss chicory, aren’t I?”

“Perhaps,” I acquiesce.

Will sighs, playing at seriousness, and not very well – he can’t keep the grin off his face. “Guess I better book a ticket home, then.”

“Good thing you didn’t unpack yet.”

Will devours the food and I sneak into the kitchen again to find more. Murasaki seems to have anticipated our needs, as there are fresh groceries in the icebox and prepared baguette sandwiches resting on a plate beneath a cloth.

One thing that has certainly changed – Will used to eat like a bird, picking at his plate. He loved his grandmother’s cooking, but she could never convince him to eat more than a small portion. It drove her to distraction when he would return to the kitchen an hour after supper and declare he was hungry again. Now he has no trouble filling his stomach in one sitting, a walking bottomless pit now as a 16-year-old.

When we’ve eaten every scrap, we get back in bed. “What should we do first?” he wonders, his breath tickling my chest where he’s tucked under my arm, playing with the crop of chest hair I’m intent on growing. I kiss his forehead three times before he answers himself. “Maybe we should build a new fort here. Better yet – does Paris have a swimmin’ hole? We could catch us some, ah… tadpoles, maybe a crawfish or two?”

“Perhaps a trip to the top of the Tour Eiffel would be more appropriate.”

He shifts on top of me, kissing me with his coffee-sweet mouth. I can taste all the notes of the arabica beans, the luxury of the sugar, all mingled with the perfect flavor of his mouth, meant for me to savor.

Again, our laughter comes so easily. We are now in an entirely different world, after the agony of separation, and some things never change. It makes my heart buoyant.

“When did you know?” he asks me now. “That you… had these kinda feelin’s…?”

I feel heat rising to my cheeks, and so I deflect childishly. “You first.”

“I asked!”

We wrestle a bit, the blankets abandoning ship. I trap him under me and hold his wrists against the mattress. He doesn't seem to mind being caught whatsoever. "Uncle," he says just before I kiss him, drifting my lips around the edge of his jaw and down his throat the way he kissed me there. Will opens beneath me when I do, ripens. He's perfect now, just like the watermelon we stole. I want to devour him to the rind.

"Tell me," I breathe against his clavicle before tasting the salt there.

He trembles beneath me and I can feel him hardening against my leg. "At the library," he reveals.

"The library?" My words are muffled as I kiss the seam between his pectoral muscles. His trembling increases.

"Yeah, y'know, we went on that, ah… that Greek mythology kick? Read every book in the place on it and played Trojan War in the bayou?"

I nod, spreading myself over him gingerly, angling myself with care now that my own insistent anatomy has awakened. "You were twelve, I believe."

"Yeah." He bites his lip, a gentle press of teeth. I watch as the sweet petal slides free of their ivory grip and rejoins the cupid's bow of his upper mouth. "I was reading about, uh, Hyacinth. Apollo's… lover. And how Zephyrus, the West Wind, wanted him, too. And they were both sort of, uhm…" he laughs suddenly, trying to get his hands out of my grip. I let him go and he runs his fingers nervously through his hair despite the wide grin on his face. He looks at me again. "There was this picture in the book from some Greek pottery of the west wind and Hyacinth doing… something, it was hard to understand, but, ah… it made me feel real funny. And then I thought about *you* , with wings, flying with me and doing… again, I didn't know what, but…"

"I know the picture you describe," I assure him. "Very well. I studied it at length myself. Of course, the details aren't apparent, but from what I've read, the red-figure vase is from the 5th century BC and depicts the couple engaging in what's known as intercrural sex."

Will blushes immediately, all down his chest. "What the hell is that?" he laughs.

"It's difficult to explain." Never mind that I've done extensive research on the role it played in Greek society and the tradition of the *eromenos* .

"Do you have to be able to fly to make it work?" he jokes as I let him up and we face each other on the bed.

"I suppose we'll find out."

Will's smile doesn't fade when I touch him, so much as it transforms into an expression of deep appreciation. He winds his arms around my neck as I draw him close, lifting him gently and slipping my cock between his thighs, along his warm crevice. When I grasp him by the small of his back and just under the curve of his ass and draw us together – just like the drawing on the ancient vase – his cock rubs against my stomach, trapped between us.

He holds me tight around the neck and shoulders, kissing and nuzzling against the slope there where one part of my body becomes another. His sighs and soft moans are so encouraging, as are the memories of last night, that I no longer fear not knowing how to please him. Our bodies fit together perfectly with his being a few inches shorter and his frame more slender. Even the size and shape of our sex organs seem perfectly suited somehow, even if not for reproductive purposes. He was built for my pleasure and I was built for his.

I begin to move and he gasps against the tender skin of my throat. “When did… you know?” he asks breathily, gripping my shoulder and the hair on the back of my head as I begin to thrust in earnest, blind with bliss.

“I loved you – the first day we met,” I tell him, punctuating my declaration with rocking motions to stimulate us both. “When my body… understood sex – was capable of it – you were all I ever wanted… Will…!”

He clutches my face and kisses me with a ravenous, feral mouth, my confession helping him cast aside his last hesitation. I spill with a sudden rush, clutching him to me, emitting an unhinged growl. He rubs himself against me, a desperate rut. Still panting, I reach between us and trap him against my stomach so he can thrust through my hand. And again, I am blessed with the warmth of his emission as it bursts from him, leaving him a trembling mess of panted breath and sweat.

When I’m able to speak, I say what I’ve written over and over but never spoken aloud. “I love you, Will.”

He kisses me between deep, grateful breaths. “I love you, too, *cher* , I love you…”

Later, in the bath, I recline him against me, circling his body with my own. Our legs are too long and stick out of the water. We must look ridiculous, two long-limbed boys insisting on a bath together. It is heaven.

“So, Eiffel Tower?”

He hums. “Maybe tomorrow. Maybe I just want to stay in with you.”

“A capital idea.” I brush his damp hair from his forehead before washing it for him, massaging his scalp and rinsing the suds away. “I have another idea.”

“Hmm?”

“Grow your hair out again,” I plead.

He chuckles. “What about Archambault Academy?”

“Just until the term starts.”

“Fine by me.” He strokes his hand over the round of my knee and up my thigh, dipping into the water. “Can we go to one of those jazz caves tomorrow?”

“Of course.”

Will turns in the bath, sloshing some water over the side, and locks his lips over mine for a long, delicious moment. “*Laissez le bon temps rouler.*”

And we will have good times. Wonderful times. Paris is ours. Will still has two years to finish his basic secondary education. I have plans to work for a local medical college and gain some practical experience before I pursue my degree, perhaps in America. These will be good times, as Paris slowly reanimates, the old buildings restored, others torn down to make way for the modern era, Notre Dame washed white.

And when it’s time, we’ll go to Lithuania and find the men who killed my sister, Will and I. And it will be beautiful.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading, and thanks to ByronicHero for requesting this concept!

I hope to write a sequel or two to this story someday, as I love historical AUs. I'd be really interested in researching post WWII Europe some more and giving Will and Hannibal a chance to get revenge for what happened to their families. I'd love to give it a "Talented Mr. Ripley" vibe, mixed with "A Sport and a Pastime." Each novel takes place in 1950s and early 60s Europe/France. I'd also love to have Hannibal and Will hang with Cocteau or some of the other artists and writers of the time, and learn more about gay culture in that time period. In England, for example, in 1953 people could still be arrested for having gay sex. France was more lax, but that adds another layer of "criminality" for our murder husbands. Normally I don't write about societal homophobia -- you know that in Bram Stoker's Hannibal, since there are supernatural and otherworldly elements that make the plot unrealistic by definition, I just chose to get rid of homophobia entirely in Victorian England while stlll keeping religious and strict societal codes regarding dress and sex and marriage, etc.

Anyway, I hope to return to this world someday. Roughly I plan to have 2 sequels of similiar length, one where Will and Hannibal are in their twenties enjoying Europe and then hunting down Mischa's killers. And then a third story going after the sniper that shot Will's mother and perhaps other former Nazis that have escaped justice. Can you imagine the murder tableaus?

All right, take care everyone, I love you much.

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